

About Face

Aspects of Art History and Identity in South African Visual Culture

Colin Richards

... to represent someone or ... something has become an endeavour as complex and as problematic as an asymptote, with consequences for certainty and decideability as fraught with difficulties as can be imagined. [In addition] the notion the colonised ... presents its own brand of volatility ...

[And to be colonised] is potentially to be a great many different, but inferior, things, in many different places, at many different times.¹

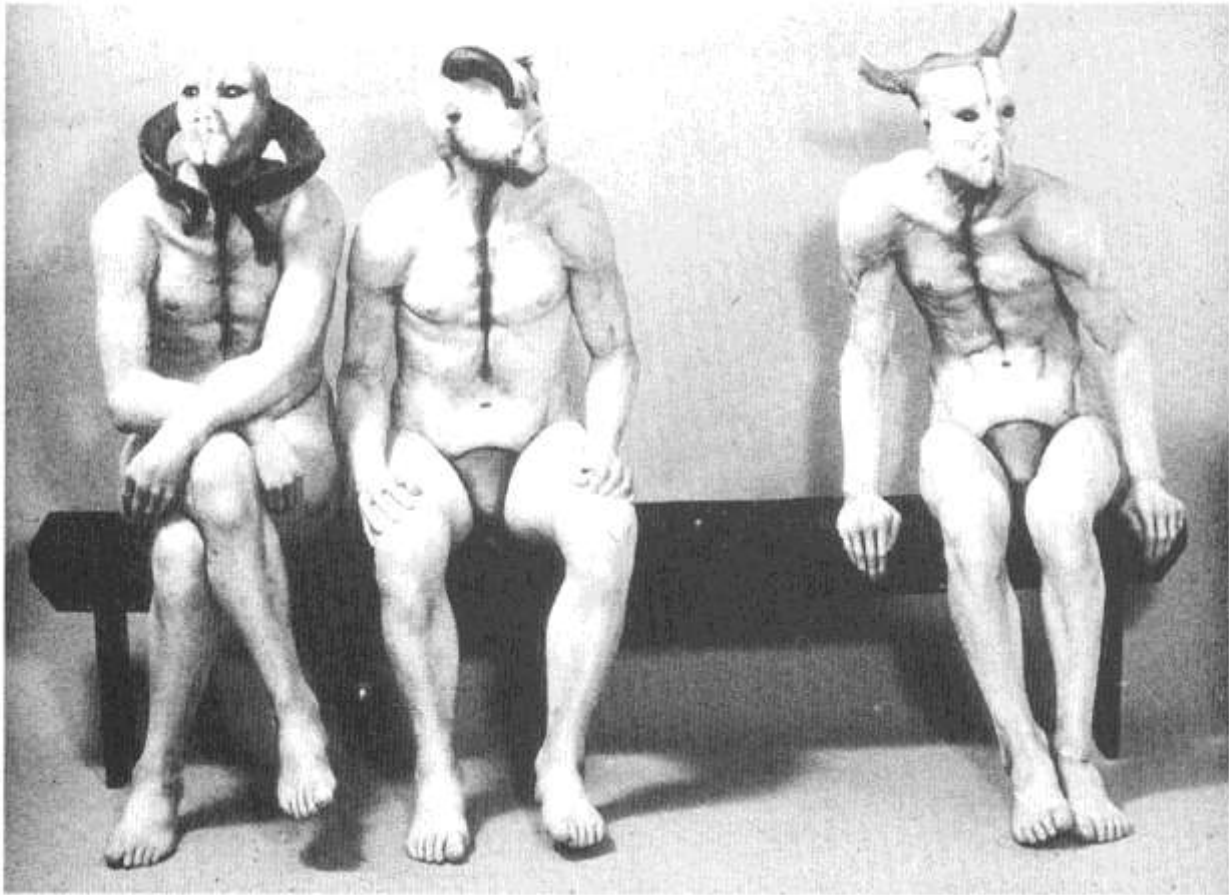
Edward W. Said

VISIONS

Impossibly overshadowing colonialism, the apartheid vision has ensured that even to speak *about* cultural others – let alone speak *for* them – is to risk reproducing its repressive regimes. In writing here I cannot represent other voices, but if I do it is only by default.

Given an apartheid vision we might also speak of an *apartheid gaze*. Like other gazes it colonises. It regulates meaning; it interrogates, maims and murders. While race monopolises this gaze, it incorporates other exploitative visions – like classism, sexism and ethnic prejudice. It will survive the laws that bolster

it and outlive our generation. Colluding with other oppressive visions in Western ocularcentrism² – this gaze reveals the naked eye of Western scopophilia. Spotted with blindness, it produces its own field of 'discriminations'. While totalitarian, the apartheid gaze is not total. Its culture spawns a counter-culture. Its pseudo-traditions are confronted by 'other' traditions. In facing down apartheid culture the culture of resistance has often only been able to glance at a more imaginative future out of the corner of its eye. It has had little choice. Its struggle has mostly



Jane Alexander *Butcher Boys* 1986



Paul Stopforth *Biko I* 1986

been to *create* conditions for creativity. It has seldom created those conditions itself. The challenge now is how to begin to realise what has only been glimpsed through fissures in the finally failing white nationalist hegemony. This process has begun. While the cultural struggle continues across a broad front, its terms appear to be shifting: shifting from the demands of combat to those of self-definition, from strategies of boycott and confrontation to those of critical engagement. Some fleeting (and non-mystifying!) signs of this have been noticeable since the early eighties, perhaps even before, although these have been frail and difficult to sustain.

Albie Sachs' recent plea, from within and to the broad liberation movement, for cultural openness and critical introspection signals this shift.³ Speaking to a Swedish audience not long ago, he had this to say:

You [Swedes] know who you are. Perhaps your artists have to explore underneath all your certainties, dig away at false consciousness. We South Africans fight against real consciousness, apartheid consciousness, we know what we struggle against. ... But we don't know who we ourselves are. What does it mean to be a South African? The artists, more than anyone, can help us discover ourselves.⁴

For Sachs culture and identity interweave; "Culture is a very deep thing. It's about who we are. It's what we mean when we say we are South Africans."⁵

NATIONALISM?

An obvious dynamic in this (re)constructing of selves and others is nationalism. Notions of nation-building permeate cultural rhetoric across time and the political spectrum: from Mangaliso (Robert) Sobukwe's pan africanism⁶ to the African National Congress' (ANC) humanistic cultural pluralism,⁷ from F.W. de Klerk's 'new' South Africa⁸ to Andries Treurnicht's 'old' South Africa. All in one place at one time.

It is hardly surprising that uncomfortably similar rhetoric sometimes articulates the cultural visions of those otherwise in radical and even violent opposition. For example, the tag 'unity in diversity' we find in a recent article in *Mayibuye* (the journal of the ANC) — titled

'Culture: the Antidote to Apartheid'⁹ — recalls the self-same slogan of the controversial Republic Festival of 1981. At that time the Apartheid state's cultural celebration of its hegemony was heavily contested by those only now beginning to emerge from its long shadow.

Both the struggle for liberation and the maintenance of the status quo is often cast in terms of nationalism. Ethnicity, like nationalism, clearly involves achieving political goals — getting and keeping power, mobilising a following "through the idiom of cultural commonness and difference."¹⁰ Tribal constructs play a powerful part in both.¹¹ The Apartheid vision of white Afrikaner nationalism has segregated ethnic groups 'self-

Jane Alexander *Untitled* 1986

